12

A Pandemic Crisis Seen from the Screen: A Reflection on Pandemic Imagination

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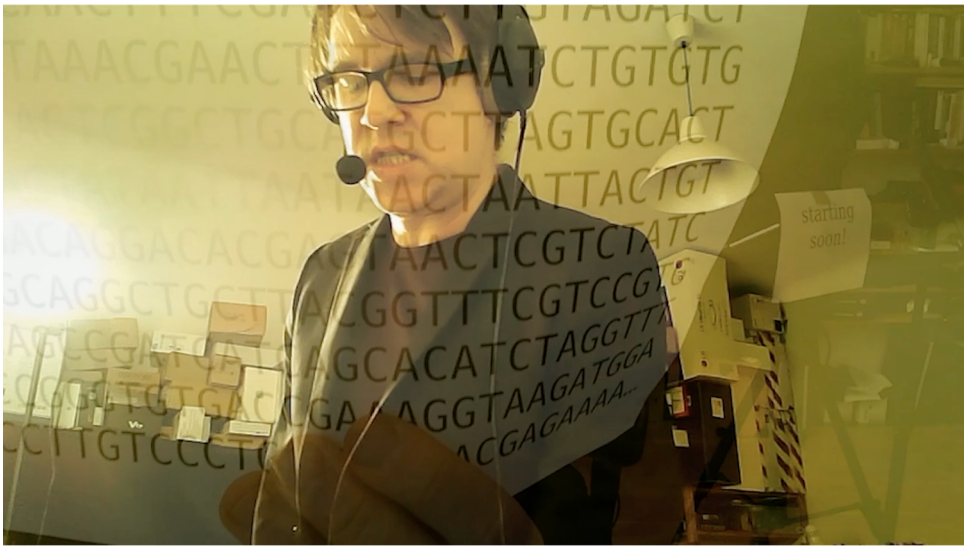

FIGURE 12.1: Jörg Piringer: *Covid-19 genome* poem, screenshot from Piringer's 'Quarantine TV'. Courtesy of the artist.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic faded in early 2022, the agenda has been overtaken by other major issues, such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, and this has led to a certain tiredness if not bare repression of the pandemic experience. However, we believe it is important to revisit the cultural experience of the pandemic not only to reflect on how it challenged us and our societies but also to point out alternatives that are still relevant now, even if other problems have occurred (see Figure 12.1). In fact, the very experience of the pandemic as a hyperobject might be worth reflecting on, as we will attempt to do below, in order to understand and deal with other continuing hyperobject crises such as racism, inequality and climate destruction (Morton 2013). Our focus in the following will be on our research on electronic literature, digital artists and the pandemic, which we will present below, including a focus on our chosen work by the artist Ben Grosser *The Endless Doomscroller*, which will be put in relation to other works from our exhibition, collection and documentary.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we became acquainted with medical scientists, epidemiologists and statisticians, but even after the pandemic we still miss a clearer understanding of the cultural, existential and epistemological questions of the pandemic and more than a year of isolated screen reality. Cultural life and institutions seem to be the least prioritised after opening society, even if crises hit hard within these fields. Nevertheless, cultural and collective processing of the pandemic is taking place, and this is important for both contemporary and future preparedness for coping with pandemics and larger crises. The German scholar of memory studies, Astrid Errl, points to how we were unprepared in Europe in 2020 when COVID-19 arrived because we were largely spared from recent epidemics such as Ebola, Zika virus, MERS and SARS, and because AIDS HIV mainly hit a minority group. Even though 50,000,000 people died during the Spanish Flu (1918–19) pandemic, it has largely been forgotten, perhaps because of its entanglement with the aftermath of the First World War and other epidemics like tuberculosis, as well as its lack of narrativity, tellability and canonical visual art. Compared to the medieval plague, 'the Spanish Flu was "not sufficiently imagined". As it was not a "pandemic imagined", it did not turn into a "pandemic remembered"' (Erll 2020a: 865, 2020b). This leads us to ask how our current pandemic will be imagined and remembered.

Digital art and electronic literature have, since their beginnings, explored new and alternative modes of narrativity and visuality, including discussions about the very foundation of narration and visuality in digital media marked by interaction, coded and algorithmic infrastructures, networks, etc., resulting in genres such as combinatory poetics, hypertext fiction, interactive fiction and poetry and network writing (Rettberg 2019). Exploring the aesthetics of digital art related to the pandemic is relevant in order to discuss how to understand, process and cope with it. This might also be relevant for similar crises in the digital age. By virtue of its artistic medium of expression, digital art reflects on life on and behind the screen, including how

we are increasingly governed by interfaces, corporate platforms and software. The pandemic crisis has been a climax in the age of corporate meta-interfaces and platform culture (Andersen and Pold 2018; Gillespie 2010) in which many have carried out their work, social life, education and cultural activities entirely behind and through screens. If the current pandemic had happened 30 years ago, all these experiences would have been different and much more difficult. People have learned to take advantage of all the tools and services of platform culture – as the skyrocketing stock values of corporate platform companies like Amazon, Facebook, Google and Zoom during the pandemic demonstrate – however, there has also been increased awareness of the shortcomings, problems and damage caused by these platforms. Discussions of everything from Zoom fatigue, how platforms are squeezing and even strangling their content producers, how social media are damaging to public discourse and democracy, to issues of surveillance capitalism and the carbon emission of cloud computing have entered the public sphere, and there is a greater understanding emerging of the costs of our 'free' participation in activities on platforms.

Consequently, we set out to explore the aesthetics, narrativity and use of media in electronic literature and digital art related to COVID-19. Beginning in the spring of 2020, shortly after the first lockdown, we began exploring how digital art and electronic literature (e-lit) relate to the pandemic through online discussions, a questionnaire and a conference roundtable, which took place on 17 July 2020 at the Electronic Literature Organization's (ELO) 2020 conference and is well documented.[1] This initial work led to the 'Electronic Literature and COVID-19' project (funded by DARIAH-EU) and a call for projects for the exhibition *Covid E-lit – Digital Art from the Pandemic*, which opened on 1 May 2021 with 24 works chosen through peer review which was presented at an opening and the ELO 2021 conference.[2]

Our respondents were primarily from North America and Europe. We also created the research collection on the ELMCIP knowledge base that collects works reflecting on the pandemic.[3] Furthermore, during March and April, we conducted recorded interviews through video conference (Zoom) with eighteen artists who were responsible for thirteen different works. Each interview lasted about 45–60 minutes as part of the project. The interviewed artists were chosen first because their work was interesting and of high artistic quality, and second, with consideration of approaching a diversity of themes, approaches, gender, ethnicity and geography. The interviewed artists and works were: Alex Saum: *Room #3* (San Francisco), Jody Zellen: *Ghost City, Avenue S* (Boston, NY, Los Angeles), Ben Grosser: *Endless Doomscroller* (Urbana Champaign), Annie Abrahams: *Pandemic Encounter* (NL, Montpellier, FR), Sharon Daniel and Erik Loyer: *Exposed* (Santa Barbara, LA), Mark Sample: *Content Moderator Sim* (Davidson, North Carolina), Mark Marino and Family: *Coronation* (Los Angeles), Giulia Carla-Rossi: *The British Library Simulator* (London), Bilal Mohammed: *Lost Inside: A Digital Inquiry* (San Diego),

Xtine Burrough: *I got up* (Dallas), Giselle Beiguelman: *Coronario* (São Paulo), Jörg Piringer: *QuarantineTV + Virus genome* (Vienna), and Judd Morrisey, Abraham Avnisan and Mark Jeffery: *The Tenders: Embrasures in the Fort's Collapse* (Chicago). From the open call, we did get a majority of works from the United States, which is still noticeable in the list of interviewees above, though we chose to include some from outside of the United States to mitigate this imbalance. The overweight of the US-based works might be partly coincidental but might also have something to do with the fact that the call was released as part of the ELO 2021 conference, even though ELO has lately aimed and succeeded to include artists and researchers from outside of the United States, including from Europe, South East Asia, Africa, etc. ELO was founded in the United States and is probably still best incorporated into North American academic traditions and literary departments, whereas the field of digital arts in Europe and Asia is oriented more towards media art festivals, such as Ars Electronica (Linz) or Transmediale (Berlin) and museums, such as Zentrum für Kunst und Medien, Karlsruhe (ZKM). Even though these fields overlap significantly, there still seems to be a wall separating them; hence, our conscious use of both electronic literature and digital art in our titles and texts.

The interviews were conducted as semi-structured (Leavy and Brinkmann 2014) with questions related to (1) a description of and motivation behind the work, (2) the choice of genres and literary, aesthetic and narrative strategies, (3) reflections on the pandemic from its outbreak to the time of the interviews one year later, (4) reflections on making e-lit and digital art during the age of platform culture and online life, (5) relations to the artistic and social community during the pandemic, (6) the relation of the pandemic to other current crises, (7) the physical environment and the effects being homebound during the lockdown and (8) their localized experience of the pandemic.[4] The interviews formed the basis of the 44-minute documentary *Covid E-Lit: Digital Art During the Pandemic*, which premiered at the 2021 Oslo International Poetry Festival and is publicly available on the open web (Nacher et al. 2022). Libraries (including the Roskilde Library, Bergen Library and The British Library) are also screening the film and including it in their collections.[5]

Obviously, many activities and artworks are dealing with the pandemic around the world, and we do not claim to be able to obtain a full overview of all this.[6] However, through our method with conference roundtables and panels, an open call, interviews, questionnaires and open presentations of material and findings, we believe that we can claim a structured, qualitative procedure and collection of material within the global community of electronic literature and neighbouring fields. Hopefully, this secures some basis and validity for our observations, though it is the case that the pandemic has been experienced individually as well as collectively and in many different contexts and societies across the world. Even within small, rich countries, such as Denmark or Norway, there are large differences

between the experiences of a fairly well-off middle class comfortably sequestered in their own houses and gardens and students living in dormitories or migrants living closely together in community apartments. Furthermore, the differences between individual experiences in countries where the spread of infection has been fairly under control and others, where it has not been sufficiently contained which led to political turmoil (such as the United States, Brazil, India, etc.) are important, as are the differences between people working at front-line jobs (such as nurses or bus drivers) and office workers working from home (cf. also Erll 2020a: 863; Markham et al. 2020: 2). Even if our pool of interviewees included people from different countries and ethnicities, by focusing on artists who were also often academics, our demography overrepresented people working from home in relative safety. This aspect is addressed in the interview by Mark Sample, where he, in a remarkably self-critical way, looks back at his work from the beginning of the pandemic, *The Infinite Catalog of Crushed Dreams*:

> When I look back at *The Infinite Catalog of Crushed Dreams*, I almost cringe at how middle-class Anglo-centric, American-centric it is. And partly that's because I based it on my own experiences and what was being filtered through me, to me, through friends and family. But, on the other hand, it just seems very ignorant of what we now know to be the really disparate impact of the virus itself and the economic shutdown, shutdowns on different groups of people. So that the kind of people who are mostly in *Infinite Catalog* are people who are probably still doing OK, versus, you know, like Latinx or African Americans or people in other countries, that now there's this kind of vaccine disparity that we see unfolding, I feel like my piece doesn't capture all those realities of the pandemic that we now know.
>
> (Sample 2021: n.pag.)

However, in our exhibition and as part of our interviews, we do have several works and artists that represent vulnerable populations, such as Sharon Daniel and Erik Loyer's *Exposed* (about inmates exposed to COVID in the US incarceration system), Giselle Beiguelman's *Coronario* (about how the pandemic-related language was controlled in Brazil by the Bolsonaro's government and Google) or Bilal Mohammed's *Lost Inside: A Digital Inquiry* (which includes reflections on experiencing the pandemic from a minority perspective).

Unrepresentability and monumentality

As pointed out by Astrid Erll, the experience of the Spanish Flu in 1918/19 has 'remained unremembered', even though it killed more people than the First World

War and Second World War put together (Erll 2020a, 2020b: 47). Just as there are virtually no monuments to the Spanish Flu, it is difficult to imagine monuments to COVID-19 beyond the many graphs and statistics we have been relentlessly exposed to. Erll indeed points out that

> Covid-19 is the first global pandemic of the digital age. In terms of archives (including worldwide digital information about case numbers and the circulation of personal experiences via social media), there will be an abundance of sources for future collective memory.
>
> (Erll 2020a, 2020b: 49)

In this sense, the pandemic has left its mark online, whereas in the physical world, it has mainly been marked by a lack of traffic, people on the street, pollution and urban life and culture in general. The American artist Ben Grosser has made a continuous visualization on Instagram, almost as an illustration of how one can (not) imagine a suitable monument during the pandemic (see Figure 12.2). Based on the scale of the 9/11 monument in New York, he outlined how much space a monument of COVID-19 would require. The nearly 3000 killed in 2001 are

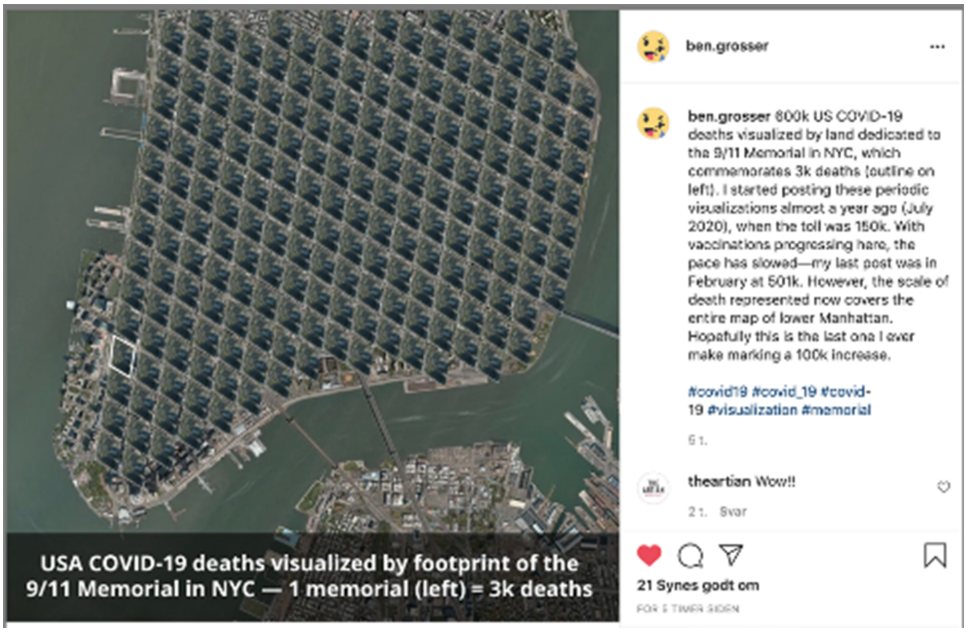

FIGURE 12.2: Ben Grosser: screenshot from *USA COVID-19 deaths visualized by the footprint of the 9/11 Memorial in NYC* (Instagram). Courtesy of the artist.

commemorated in the footprint the World Trade Center towers occupied, and if this scale were to be followed, then at the moment of writing, the more than 600,000 dead in the United States alone would take up 200 blocks in Manhattan's grid, corresponding to all of Lower Manhattan.

It seems that, to get to a cultural understanding of the pandemic, it is necessary to recognize the ways it disrupts our established frameworks of understanding the world. It is difficult to recognize the significance of major crises while they are happening, especially those that mark a major shift. There are many indications that this is the case here and that the pandemic will be seen at the level of other pivotal moments, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the emergence of digital culture and 9/11. Similar to how the Belarus Nobel Prize Laureate Svetlana Alexievich describes the situation for the people on the ground in Ukraine and Belarus in *Chernobyl Prayer*, it is a new kind of crisis that is somewhat invisible and is difficult to comprehend and predict the effects of; this disrupts traditional understandings of coherent time and space. The crisis cannot be localized or enclosed, and we cannot know when it is finally over or to what degree it is a sign of a new condition for living on the planet:

> In so many ways, the issue is massive and, at the same time, microscopic. These scales compete with each other as explanations for the ethnographic question: 'what is going on here?' They compete for our attention. They are simultaneously dialogic, oppositional, chaotic/inchoate, both/and.
>
> (Markham et al. 2020: 2)

It is perhaps no coincidence that commemoration of the victims seems to be an ambivalent undertaking and while the private and city-level attempts proliferate, the broader, national or international initiatives are stalling – as if the Covid pandemic (once it's over) were to be removed from public memory (Mooallem 2023).[7] In this sense, the pandemic is best understood as belonging to the class of what Timothy Morton calls hyperobjects: phenomena such as global warming, nuclear radiation, etc. that are 'massively distributed entities that can be thought and computed but not directly touched or seen. The simultaneous unavailability yet reality of the hyperobject requires a radical new form of thinking to cope with it' (Morton 2013: 39).

Michael Taussig compares the pandemic urban space to Giorgio de Chirico's melancholy paintings of Roman arcades and empty streets, which he describes as 'capturing the aura Walter Benjamin found in Eugène Atget's photographs of Paris streets likewise without people' (Taussig 2021: 33). Interestingly, Atget's photographs were remade by Mauricio Lima during the lockdown in spring 2020, striking an atmosphere that many can recognize from walking in empty urban

streets through the lockdown, where most of the normal life, functions and institutions of the city were paused, diverted and left as empty shells (Nossiter 2020). Taussig sees potential for redemption in this through its re-enchanting of a disenchanted nature that has led to the climate and biodiversity crisis and he thinks that we need a new kind of aesthetics and experience:

> But what the question opens up is the thought that, with global meltdown, we now live in a reenchanted universe for which the aesthetic of a dark surrealism is relevant. It is a mutating reality of metamorphic sublimity that never lets you know what is real and what is not. Born from WWI, there is a lot of Dada here too, with its shock effects and montage. We were told the bourgeoisie had gotten bored with that. But now, has not Dada and surrealism returned with a vengeance? Before, it was avant-garde subsiding into history. But now, with the reenchantment of nature, history is subsiding into Dada.
>
> (Taussig 2021: 35–36)

Taussig mentions the shock effects and montage of Dada, which we will get back to below. He follows Benjamin in arguing for the relevance of a new perception, a re-enchantment or what Benjamin calls a 'literarization of the conditions of life', which points to changes in our epistemic understanding of our surroundings, environment and our place in this (Benjamin 1999: 527).

Related to the portrayal of the conditions of life and the deserted urban public, American net artist Jody Zellen has made *Avenue S* a new part of her enduring net art piece *Ghost City* (see Figure 12.3). She calls it a 'pandemic journal' and a 'response to what's around', which is simultaneously 'comical, tragic and humorous' in its ways of showing empty streets with lonely stick figures endlessly spinning on treadmills or trying to move on in difficult settings. It portrays people mechanically controlled by their environment as an allegory of life during the pandemic, but perhaps parallel to Taussig's hope for a re-enchantment, there are also beautiful moments that show people's reactions through, for example, drawings on the street or moments of protest and demonstrations such as Black Lives Matter. The piece expresses a general, specific impersonal, non-auratic beauty through its visual expression and societal perspective. It shows us faceless people behind masks who are threatened by anxiety and angst in persistent patterns, but the patterns have a sense of beauty. It includes many animations of people spinning in repeated circles, which are both tragic and meditative:

> there's a lot of kind of spinning in circles, you know, because I think that's technically how we feel, how I feel. And again, it was sort of the hope that how I feel can resonate with how other people are feeling now.
>
> (Zellen 2021: n.pag.)

FIGURE 12.3: Jody Zellen: screenshot from *Ghost City, Avenue S*. Courtesy of the artist.

The piece is, as Zellen states, 'kind of narrative', though 'certainly not linear' but rather circular 'so the very last page always goes back to the very first page […] it always takes you around and around like you're getting lost in the city from

which you can't escape'. *Avenue S* marks a return to net art for Zellen as 'a kind of public art' during a pandemic where the public became digital through commercial platforms and where the urban public is deserted. Its collages become like cave paintings from the present to the future, or in Siegfried Kracauer's sense, pandemic mass ornaments, showing us a 'literarization of the conditions of life' during the pandemic.[8] In this sense, *Avenue S* is an allegory of the pandemic, showing what is not immediately represented: how the biopolitics of the pandemic with all its statistical measures create a different society where humans are not placed at centre stage but are figures in an urban and environmental scenography.

Pandemic language, discourse and narrative economy

The discourse during the pandemic has been influenced by the many new words that have come along with it, and some of these words have been part of both an ideological and algorithmic battle zone. The Brazilian artist Giselle Beiguelman created a hypertext essay called 'Coronário / Coronary' based on 25 corona-related words, which reflects on how language is affected by the pandemic (see Figure 12.4). However, the work also shows how language use is monitored by platforms, demonstrated in the work through a heat map where the words are coloured by click rate as a parallel to how Google or Facebook registers user behaviour. *Coronary* has a special focus on Brazil, which has been hit very hard by the pandemic and by Jair Bolsonaro's incompetence in dealing with it. It contains words such as

FIGURE 12.4: Screenshot from *Coronário* by Giselle Beiguelman. Courtesy of the artist.

'Communavirus' created by Bolsonaro's foreign minister to link coronavirus with communism in the style of Donald Trump's 'China virus', and a word like 'mask' changes its contextual meaning from being associated with carnival to quarantine.

When we asked her about her choice of aesthetic strategy and genre, Giselle Beiguelman stated how the work is related to the political situation in Brazil and the development of new words and discourse:

> One year ago, at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic […], our ambassador, the minister of foreign affairs, stated that there was no coronavirus. What we have in the world is a pandemic of communa-virus that the virus came from China and it was inoculating spies. […] This was just the beginning. And this discourse I was looking about, what does it mean, […] and I was doing a search on Google Trends to measure the impact of these words […]. And it was a little bit disappointing, because, yes, it was something exclusive of us in Portuguese. […] And then the Google Trends suggests at the same time, well, if you are searching for these, maybe you can compare with these. Suddenly, there was a constellation of words that we never used before, like alcohol gel and pandemic. And so, I decided to do more objective research and work with it, in the logic of the Google Trends, the Google Trends always organizes the results in groups of 25 words. […] So it was clear that language was the skin, the first level of a very deep change, social, political and cultural that we were, by then discovering; now it's becoming our new normal. And then I decided to make this reading clear through an interface that registered the attention that each word receives from the public.
>
> (Beiguelman 2021: n.pag.)

As it becomes clear, *Coronary* is a work about language, how language is ideologically controlled by the Bolsonaro regime and how this is reinforced by surveillance technologies in a situation that has been integrated with a conflictual political situation in Brazil that has been carried out concerning the pandemic and the Bolsonaro government's (lack of) reaction to it. In our interview, Beiguelman further explains how this is related to Brazilian social conflicts and people living in favelas without the necessary space for social isolation or the resources to stay isolated, which has led to an increase in the number of people living on the street. During a period in which information visualization became the primary mode of communicating the immensity of the crisis, Beiguelman used the vernacular of visualization to communicate the weaponization of language as a discourse of power.

The control of discourse through platforms such as Google and Facebook has in general led to pressure on public discourse. Even if sensationalist news is not new, it is now algorithmically proliferated by social media, resulting in a favouring of extreme voices with a lack of nuances and in some cases even conspiracies,

which are growing out of the pent-up emotions after more than a year in social isolation. *The Endless Doomscroller* by Ben Grosser shows how the algorithmic feed mechanisms of social media, combined with click-bait headlines and a populace stuck online, form a 'perfect yet evil marriage' promoting a desire for more engagement without bringing satisfaction (see Figure 12.5) (Grosser 2021a). *The Endless Doomscroller* demonstrates how this combination of clickbait and social media creates a plot machine without closure that creates engagement rather than knowledge, which is perfectly in line with the social media business model. Users get an endless scroll of bad news, which is never too concrete or precise, but enables endless scrolling of ominous headlines.

An affective compulsion to consume ambient information supersedes a connection to a specific incident or even to reality. As pointed out by Grosser, *The Endless Doomscroller's* primary technique is one of reduction by how it 'distils news and social media sites down to their barest most generalized messages and interface conventions', such as simplified negative headlines and the infinite scroll interface

FIGURE 12.5: Screenshot from *The Endless Doomscroller* by Ben Grosser. Courtesy of the artist.

of social media. He characterizes the infinite scroll interface common to social media as a 'minimalist hiding […] of the datafication, monitoring and profiling going on in cloud computing infrastructures behind its immediate, minimalist user-interface' which keeps the user in a WHILE loop where the practical stop condition becomes 'something akin to a fatal exception in computing', such as when the user falls asleep or the device runs out of power (Grosser 2021a: 3). Grosser concludes, 'Through these tactics, *The Endless Doomscroller* deconstructs the doomscrolling metainterface, revealing how it is changing what and how we read in the digital and pandemic age' (Grosser 2021a: 6). It is a work that demonstrates and consequently makes people aware of the mechanisms behind the metainterface. In our interview, Grosser mentions how he was inspired by his being 'stuck in a pattern of just continually scrolling and scanning' and taking his own experience as a starting point he hopes to

> help people develop their own critical lens on what it means to be a user of a platform. That is a relationship that is, from the platform's perspective, a hyper-designed, hyper-analyzed relationship that is all about the production of certain kinds of behavior from the user.
>
> (Ben Grosser 2021b: n.pag.)

Consequently, *The Endless Doomscroller* explores the pandemic plot machine, its algorithms, interface and infrastructure from the user interface perspective – it critically reflects on how users are subject to the pandemic plot machine, which with the above suggestion by Taussig and by Tristan Tzara's 'To make a dadaist poem' in mind can characterize as digital dadaism.

The American artist Mark Sample has made a parallel work with *Content Moderator Sim* that moves the perspective behind the immediate user interface. It is a game that simulates the working environment for social media content moderators who, on a tight piecework schedule, sort all the materials that have been marked as offensive by users or algorithms. In the game, users are presented with repeated examples, with the option of either allowing or blocking, stressed by the tight pressure of time. Often it is impossible within the given time to determine whether it is expressions of marginalized groups, coarse jokes or actual racism and violent hate speech. The game clearly reflects the stressful role of being the editor who must muck out the trash of social media, and, according to the interview we did with Mark Sample, it is realistic in the sense that he 'interwove into the game various rationales from Facebook's own handbooks that it gives its content moderators about when something is acceptable or not'. Ultimately, the game portrays how the human content moderators are themselves almost turned into algorithms by this interface to gauge these expressions: 'the content moderator humans are

just placeholders until AI is sophisticated enough to do this work'. The process is an example of human computation in which human labour – in this case, ethical judgment – is simplified to being just one step in a computational process, directed by an algorithm rather than by human intelligence. Later, Sample continues:

> I was trying to capture almost a clinically detached point of view, like the player character's voice is pretty detached describing these things until there's like one or two moments when it breaks through, like the actual emotion punched through. I was trying to capture that sense of it's almost like it's the paid version of doom scrolling.
>
> (Sample 2021: n.pag.)

In this way, Grosser and Sample show two sides of how the interface that was our primary social platform during the lockdown is constructed and how its narrative plot machinery is staged, including exploring the architecture of the interface scenography as well as the people working backstage. Both works also contain narratives partly generated by algorithms and portray how we are caught in the discourse platforms of social media. As mentioned above, at the beginning of the pandemic, Mark Sample made another work, *The Infinite Catalog of Crushed Dreams*, where an endless list of cancellations is generated under the heading 'The pandemic hit and then'. It is easy to recognize the experience of how everything was cancelled without mercy by a pandemic that was more intrusive than we, in our wildest imaginations, would have thought a few months before. The generative algorithm simulates the effect of a virus over which we have no control, and it works worryingly well as a relentless narrator of the drama of the pandemic.

The most relentless and least human digital narrator is presented by Austrian artist and sound poet Jörg Piringer's *Covid-19 genome* sound poem, in which a computer voice reads out the entire original virus genetic sequence at a fast pace. The poem is 13 minutes and 27 seconds of variants of TTTCGATC, and it draws attention to the fact that the virus itself can be represented as a form of language – for example, the word CAT is included several times and, as Piringer jokingly points out, cats provide a good basis for viral spread in a platform culture – but a language we still struggle to understand, including in its variations and mutations. As Piringer points out in our interview:

> The algorithms that scientists used to analyse genomes in general, are text algorithms, in fact. So, there's a kind of small section of computer science that is called […] stringology, which is about strings, character strings. And what they do is find patterns in strings and analyse them. And that's actually what we as artists do. And especially when you work with data and transform it into literature, that's what

> you do when you work with computers, and they do it as well. So, it is kind of very closely related. They don't see it as literature, but you could see it as literature I think. (Piringer 2021: n.pag.)

All of these works point to how language in the context of software platforms has been shaped in an algorithmic power struggle that has also shaped us. This power struggle includes technological, commercial, political, national and international actors, and it ranges from the very words the pandemic is presented with, as exemplified by Beiguelman, to the way they are presented and plotted in technological, political and commercial platforms, as demonstrated by Grosser and Sample, and to the way that the virus itself is represented and treated as coded letters and strings, including in DNA sequencing to develop vaccines or finding mutations, as explored by Piringer. In general, it points to a semioticization process which, combined with increased computation, leads to a pandemic discourse economy where language becomes power (as in who controls the rhetoric), capital (as in who controls our attention) and even biology through genetic virus code that we struggle to understand but might reflect on as/through literature. As N. Katherine Hayles points out, the novel coronavirus is posthuman in that it is 'oblivious to human intentions, desires, and motives', but also in the more technical way that humans and viruses have adopted diametrically opposed evolutionary strategies of complexity versus simplicity, though viruses are still an important part of biological evolution and reproduction. As Hayles puts it, 'It screams at jet engine volume that we are interdependent not only with each other but also with the entire ecology of the earth' (Hayles 2021: 68, 70).

What are the poetics of this pandemic discourse economy? Clearly, it shares the allegorical dark surrealism pointed out above, of how our language and representations are enmeshed in capitalist processes that cannot be immediately seen by the individual, but which need interfaces like the ones produced by Beiguelman, Grosser, Sample and Piringer that have detached, algorithmic narrators.[9] However, these works also point towards the use of lists, like Grosser and Sample's litany of litanies. Mark Sample comments on this in our interview:

> Yeah, *The Infinite Catalog of Crushed Dreams*. And it's this kind of infinite scrolling piece. The more you scroll, you just see these lists and lists of different people and scenarios that have just been utterly broken by the coronavirus shutdown. And I was trying to capture that sense that I was feeling at the time, which is like a year ago now. So last March, I think it's when I started working on it, that feeling of, I was seeing it in my own kids and seeing it in my students, like prom was being cancelled. That concert they trained, and rehearsed for months for the play was canceled, all those trips that were canceled. So, I am just trying to capture that sense of loss. And you

> just keep scrolling and scrolling and there's, I haven't figured out the mathematics behind it, but the chances of things repeating themselves, it's like it's in the billions, one in billions of things repeating.
>
> (Sample 2021: n.pag.)

As Sample points out, the endless litanies represent a loss of control related to the virus' obliviousness to human intentions that Hayles describes; however, as pointed out by Grosser, it also becomes a mode of control enacted by the 'perfect yet evil marriage' by click-bait news and social media in a new kind of brutal digital dadaism, and Beiguelman even points to something similar as a way of controlling language by Google and the Bolsonaro regime. Hence, we see a semantic drift or even a drift of signifiers, that becomes apparent in a situation where people are struggling to make sense of the pandemic. Perhaps this drift is the current that we navigate in, trying to keep our heads above water in our individual and collective sense-making process (Nacher 2021).

Post-pandemic poetics

To conclude on the poetics of the pandemic, we have observed issues related to the representation and realism of the pandemic. As written above, with Morton, Taussig, Benjamin and Kracauer we have characterized this realism as an allegorical dark surrealism aimed at dealing with the unrepresentability of the pandemic hyperobject. Part of the unrepresentability relates to the fact that the human is decentered, if not killed, by an invisible virus, made visible through statistical control measures and biopolitics such as shown in the works of Ben Grosser (in his *USA COVID-19 deaths*[…]) and Jody Zellen. Furthermore, this kind of realism is achieved and narrated through detached, dadaist and brutal algorithmic narrators as reflected in the works by Giselle Beiguelman, Ben Grosser, Mark Sample and Jörg Piringer, enforced by economic, discursive, technologically plotted and biopolitically coded powers. As we argued with Astrid Erll (2020a, 2020b), COVID-19 is the first pandemic of the digital age and we experienced it to a large degree through digital platforms.

It is perhaps not strange that we are happy with the pandemic being over and that there are plenty of new crises to be occupied with. However, the combination of digital modelling, platformization and real-world effects does not make the pandemic unreal or virtual, but a genuine experience of a crisis related to hyperobjects – after all we rarely observed the disease directly but mainly through statistics and predictions that confined our living space and social lives such as the endless generated list of cancellations in Mark Sample's *The Infinite Catalog*.

Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a moment of reflection on the many seemingly unsolvable contemporary crises, including the climate crisis, gender and social inequality, racism, colonialism, as well as social and economic harms inflicted by platform capitalism. The experience of the hyperobject of the pandemic crisis allowed us to relate to other major crises that are also part of the works mentioned above and in our documentary, thus also opening up the space for empathy and hope for change. This reflective moment was dimmed in 2022, with the war in Ukraine urgently requiring a swift response. However, the new crises did not extinguish the old ones. Therefore, there is a need to revisit the reflections inspired by the pandemic lockdown to prompt the potential of change, even if filled with loss. In this way, electronic literature and digital art can potentially help us to better cope with hyperobjects beyond our immediate control and provide us with a means to construct a collective imaginary of our platformed present and its crises, hence learning the strategies for, as insightfully framed by Christos Lynteris following Julietta Singh, 'unthinking mastery' of human beings (Lynteris 2019: 120; Singh 2017). It is noteworthy that both accounts of how humans would need to bid farewell to the supposed control of other agencies present in the world have been offered before the COVID-19 pandemic and were based on research into the cultural patterns established after the previous pandemic episodes in human history, which only further emphasizes the need for more robust reflection around the recent wave of viral intervention in the course of human history.

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NOTES

1. The roundtable is documented here: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/elo2020/live/roundtables/7/. Accessed 14 March 2024.
2. The exhibition *Covid E-lit – Digital Art from the Pandemic* is available at https://www.eliterature.org/elo2021/covid/. Accessed 14 March 2024. Our panel 'Post(?) Pandemic Prose: Preliminary Findings of the Covid E-Lit' project was presented 27 May 2021 at the Platform Post(?) Pandemic ELO 2021 conference and a recording of it is available here: https://vimeo.com/555698083. Accessed 14 March 2024.
3. Pandemic E-Lit at *Elmcip Knowledge Base* is available here: https://elmcip.net/research-collection/pandemic-e-lit. Accessed 14 March 2024.

4. Here is the list of questions that structured the interviews:

    1. Can you describe your work in the exhibition and what inspired you to produce it?
    2. In most of the works in the exhibition, there is a sense that artists are trying to process and make sense of the pandemic situation through their work. Can you describe your artistic, literary and intellectual strategy for dealing with this?
    3. Can you say something about the genre or type of project you were drawn to creating during the pandemic or why it made sense to create in this particular form now?
    4. How do you think our cultural and intellectual consideration or understanding of the pandemic has shifted over the past year? Have any of the changes to our cultural life been positive or worth carrying on after the pandemic?
    5. Electronic Literature and digital art have always been mediated, online experiences. During this period virtually all of cultural life moved online. Did this mass migration online change the way you think about producing your work?
    6. Do you think that the audience reception and appreciation of e-lit has changed during this period?
    7. It has been argued that digital culture changed significantly from the open internet of the 1990s and early 2000s to a platform-based internet today that centres on social media, streaming platforms and mobile apps. Has this shift influenced your work?
    8. How has the pandemic changed your sense of your artistic community and social environment, in both positive and negative ways?
    9. The pandemic has come at a time of other larger crises, such the persistent climate crises and a cultural reckoning with racism. Are these other crises reflected in any way in your work?
    10. The pandemic affected everyone in ways that involved restrictions on our physical movements and environments. How did this localization in a specific place – culturally, geographically – affect your use of digital tools and response to the pandemic?
    11. What do you miss most about your life before the pandemic and what will you miss about your current life after the pandemic?

5. In Roskilde, the film was featured in an exhibition titled *Authors in Quarantine* which also used material from the *Covid E-lit – Digital Art from the Pandemic* exhibition in June 2021. The British Library has acquired it for their collection, where it will be available for viewing.
6. See for example the project 'Art in Quarantine' by Wreading Digits, http://art-in-quarantine.wreading-digits.com/ (Marques and Gago 2021, accessed 14 March 2024).
7. One of the initiatives focusing on the commemoration of the victims of the COVID-19 pandemic is Marked by Covid, relying on excavating individual stories and sharing private archives of survivors. Currently, a project to commemorate COVID-19 with an AR installation is underway (based on my conversation with Sarah Senk, one of the Marked by

Covid directors, at the MLA Convention 2023 in January 2023 in San Francisco) (Anna Nacher). Cf. Marked by Covid, https://www.markedbycovid.com; S. Senk, COVID-19 Memorials: Aesthetics and Politics, presentation at the MLA Convention 2023, 7 January 2023, San Francisco (conference presentation). A similar, Europe-based initiative is also available: The Covid-19 Visual Project, https://covid19visualproject.org/en/. Accessed 21 April 2023.

8. Kracauer writes: 'Everyone does his or her task on the conveyor belt, performing a partial function without grasping the totality. Like the pattern in the stadium, the organization stands above the masses, a monstrous figure whose creator withdraws it from the eyes of its bearers, and barely even observes it himself' (1995: 78).
9. Other works from our exhibition that work with algorithmic generative narrators should be mentioned and included here as well, e.g. Claire Fitch' *Ear for Surge*, and Amaranth Borsuk's *Curt Curtal Sonnet Corona*. Furthermore, the daily journal or chronicle is clearly part of the poetics of several works such as the ones of Xtine Burroughs, the Marino family, Bilal Mohammed and Sharon Daniel/Erik Loyer.

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